

The Lights of Beacon Hill



A Christmas Message
By
Abbie Farwell Brown.

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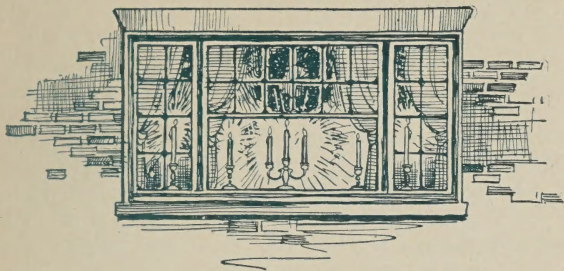
"From her Beacon-Heights
The dome-crowned City spreads her rays"

DR. HOLMES



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THE LIGHTS OF BEACON HILL

A Christmas Message

“MERRY CHRISTMAS to everybody!”

Beacon Hill flashes out the message from thousands of candles shining down the quaint and narrow streets crowded with merry-makers; crowded too with great memories, bright traditions, and green promise.

No Beacon rises now on top of the old Hill. From 1635 it stood, several times renewed, a hundred and fifty years. But it was blown down in a gale in 1789 and never rebuilt. Its first warning use was outworn. But we like to think that a Light still shines from here. On Christmas Eve at least it draws folk like moths from all the regions round about, and from far. And the light of the good old custom has been reflected to many cities over the land, who celebrate with their mother-town to-night.

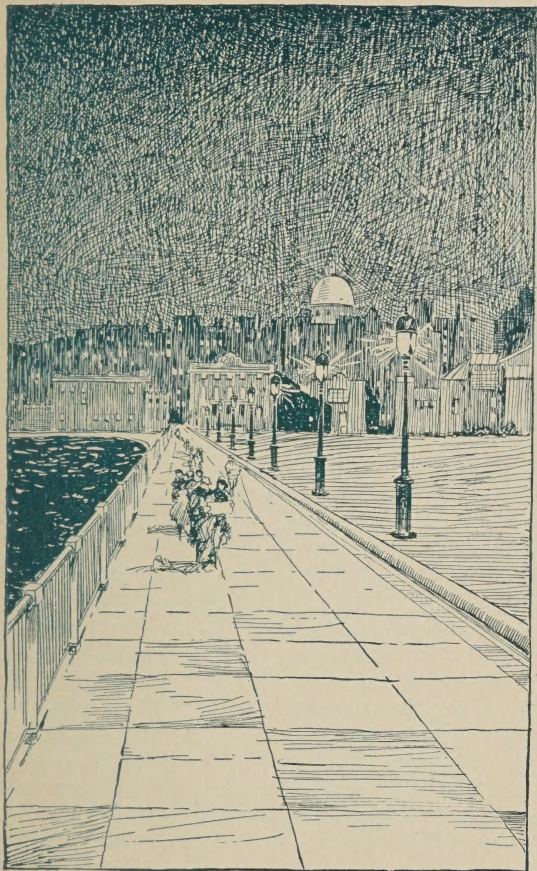
Up and down and roundabout the Hill go the

jostling good-natured revelers. They pause before candle-lighted windows to glimpse the fair interiors, where portraits by Copley or Stuart reflect hospitable smiles from living counterparts below. They sound the old brass knockers on wreathed doors, opening to old-fashioned feasts of goodies. They follow the choirs from stately mansion to open square, to convent, hospital, — even to the Jail and those who wait in darkness for the Christmas message: calling joyously to one another, — “Merry Christmas!”

Do they hear answering echoes up and down these streets? They should. The Present, the Past and the Future join in the happy cry. For the old Hill has always been hospitable (no Puritan region this). It had little to do with Endicott and his dour fellows who cut the cross out of the English flag and gayety out of the revels at Merrymount. It had brief dealing with Winthrop and his Roundheads. It has a tradition all its own, that begins in the hospitality of a book-lover, and has never lost that flavor.

Yes, our streets are inconvenient, steep and slippery. The corners are abrupt, the contours perverse, — the horror of chauffeurs. But Christmas Eve makes no account of chauffeurs; pilgrims must come afoot.

It may well be that the gibes of our envious neighbors have a foundation and that these dear crooked lanes of ours were indeed traced in ancestral mud by absent-minded kine. See Dr. Holmes's picture of the hill-slope and its earliest white settler:



*“With spongy bogs that drip and fill
A yellow pond with muddy rain,
Beneath the shaggy southern hill
Lies wet and low the Shawmut plain.
And hark! the trodden branches crack;
A crow flaps off with startled scream,
A straying woodchuck canters back;
A bittern rises from the stream;
Leaps from his lair a frightened deer;
An otter plunges in the pool; —
Here comes old Shawmut’s pioneer,
The Parson on his brindled bull.”*

Who thinks of him to-night? Does his ghost walk, I wonder, hospitable still? Somewhere between the Common and Louisburg Square dwelt our First Citizen, the gentle hermit, William Blackstone. You should think of him while you are glancing about that little town-within-a-town, seeking to identify the houses where Howells lived and wrote, where Jenny Lind was married, and where Louisa Alcott passed her happiest days; where old Bronson Alcott died.

Blackstone built his thatched cottage near the “excellent spring” of water that had toled him thither, one of those that gave the name to “Shawmut.” I believe it is that very spring under my West Cedar cellar, a forty-foot cobbled well, with remains of ancient pipes leading from it in various directions. From this spring to his famous apple-orchard, and so about the acres of his little farm that included much of our

Common, he rode his "moose-colored bull," treading the unlevel ways your feet will go Christmasing.

Blackstone was a godly Churchman and a scholar. He brought a good little library with him — the first of many on the Hill; and so we have the beginnings of our bookish tradition. How many books since then have been written and published, bought and housed, read and circulated on Beacon Hill! How many are still to be! "Study Hill" might well be its *nom de plume*, as Blackstone named his second New England home. And its motto might be "Hospitality and Books."

Blackstone was the first white man privileged to act as host on Beacon Hill. He must have been a sweet and lovable soul, that first clerical Hill dweller. For here he lived an exile in the wilderness for five years before other colonists came nearer than the Harbor, safe among Indians who had little cause to love a paleface, the same Indians with whom later the Puritan Winthrop could not get along. There was to be no "Merry Christmas" for the Puritans when they landed. But Blackstone was no Roundhead. Let us imagine him as lighting the first Christmas candle on the Hill and telling the Christmas story to those wondering Red Men who crept to see. Perhaps he made a hospitable feast for them in the English custom. Wild turkey? It may have been. But more likely it was the favorite venison pasty of old tradition, wherewithal Endicott treated Winthrop with a flourish.

That was a happy first Christmas party. But

Blackstone's hospitality was soon put to a more trying test. In 1630 came Winthrop and his solemn fellows to Charlestown across the river. They were perishing for fresh water, and Blackstone heard of it. He was a good Christian before he was a hermit. With a sigh he got into his little shallop, moored at the foot of Beacon Street (where my father used to fish), and rowed over to the Charlestown shore, to bid the newcomers to the springs of Shawmut. Glad they were to come, those thirsty, feverish souls. But to Blackstone, watching from the top of Beacon Hill, their approach must have meant heart-sickness. He had exiled himself for the sake of peace and quiet. Before long he sold out his farm, including acres of our cherished Common, and fled in disgust to the wilderness of Rhode Island.

The Puritans were too near for him, even at the North End. But they never invaded the western slope of Beacon Hill, — or Sentry Hill as it was first called. Not till after the Revolution was it built over. For a long time the houses of Copley the artist and Hancock the patriot on Beacon Street were the only dwellings on the barren Hill, which was then quite "out of town." And these houses reflected hospitality and genial joy in life, culture and progress.

*"O happy town beside the sea
Whose roads lead everywhere to all!"*

that was Emerson's phrase. Our pioneer paths did radiate from the "Beacon Heights" to the four



quarters of the world. And down them tramped the sturdy Yankee feet of men bearing books under their arms and the ancient tradition in their red blood. Down these roads traveled also high thoughts conceived upon our Hill.

Everybody knows the legend of the barn door in the nondescript building that houses Odd Volumes; how it must forever offer a thoroughfare for the ghostly Copley cow, pining for forbidden pasturage on the denuded Common. Here were pasture lanes and garden paths, squares where stood farm-yards or rope-walks; mysterious gardens that intrigued the Autocrat, — “hidden seraglios” he called them. Off Revere Street what fairy-like “courts” fragrant with Christmas green! On the dark northern slope, off Joy Street, stood the chapel where Garrison first lifted up his voice for freedom. Wendell Phillips was born on Walnut Street, in its first brick house. And on the “spacious summit” of the Hill, near where the Beacon used to stand, Charles Sumner kept an eye on the State House.

The Hill is full of surprise. Even if you were born here you are never quite used to it. Thackeray loved it; declared it like an English cathedral town. But it is not really like anything. Fashion and frumpery; libraries and laundries; romance and reason; art and argot; evergreen oases and jauntily renovated grandeurs; caroling cobblers and serenaded convents; wandering waits and waiting wonders, — where will you find its peer this Christmas Eve?

Hardly a site but has its legend, whether it be a stately mansion with courtyard and fountain, or a drab boarding-house soon to be "reclaimed." But maybe even the ugly tenement squatting on a bright memory shelters something still finer than a legend — a promise. The Hill is swarming with youthful dreamers. Young Poetry, Art, and Music are "at home" here to-night, or wandering bright-eyed with the singers.

Probably you will not have time this busy Eve to step aside from the glowing region of lights into the dingy purlieus that await regeneration. But recall for a minute that down below on Bulfinch Place once Walt Whitman lodged, and there dwelt William Warren, who for a generation made the city laugh. In grim Ashburton Place, now the den of lawyers and bookmen, lived on a while Henry James and his author-father. On the opposite side lodged Horace Mann.

Under the arch of the State House a choir is delightfully singing. But as you glance down the tree-lined slope of beautiful Mount Vernon Street, which Henry James called "the happiest street-scene the country could show," don't you catch again a murmurous ghostly overtone, still sweeter, from our choir invisible? For below here Aldrich lived and here he died. At Number 63 Whittier used to visit. Mrs. Howe was a sometime neighbor, and Marion Crawford. Here lived John D. Long, Channing, Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney, beloved of old-fashioned girls, and Anne Whitney, sculptor and poet.

Close by worked a group of historians, hard to match: Prescott, Motley, Parkman, Adams, Quincy, Ticknor. At the top of decorous Chestnut Street the Radical Club philosophized (there are clubs more radical now!). Holmes lived here for a time, so did Mrs. Howe. Through melancholy violet window-panes Edwin Booth looked out Hamlet-wise upon a world out of joint. And when east winds blew and sea-gulls screamed Richard H. Dana got whiffs of his "Two Years Before the Mast."

Through the Square to funny, steep old Pinckney Street, the perennial haunt of authors, one or more of whom may generally be seen climbing up or sliding down from an eyrie. From the top, where our own Alice Brown presides, in the quaint house once habited by E. P. Whipple, well-nigh every site deserves its golden star. Here for a while beloved Louise Guiney dwelt, wrapped in dreams. Celia Thaxter and Hawthorne were sometime guests, even as Robert Frost makes his headquarters here when he descends from North of Boston. In her hardest days Louisa Alcott wearily climbed this slope to a simple home. Here abode Jacob Abbott, father of the earnest "Rollo." By a modest hearth-stone at Number 84 the Aldriches entertained Dickens with his double watch-chains; and here "Tom Bailey" told the Story of a Bad Boy. Longfellow got his inspiration for "The Hanging of the Crane" from the same hospitable fire-place. But who can distinguish all the Voices?

Down over Blackstone's acres a constant proces-



sion of dreamers' feet have passed. Charles Street, the ancient river beach, — now swept well-nigh bare of the old mansions, was a literary thoroughfare for the English-speaking world, when James T. Fields lived at Number 148. Sarah Orne Jewett made her home for years with Mrs. Fields, and all the great writers and lecturers were their guests, in the "long drawing room" "with relics and tokens so thick on its walls as to make it . . . the votive temple to memory." "The Autocrat" was written hard by, when Holmes dwelt on Charles Street, and Lucretia P. Hale invented the joyous Peterkins in this neighborhood.

Here we are, almost home. West Cedar Street is narrow and uneven, and the Jail bulks ugly above the end of it, beyond un-Christian regions. But above us spreads a blue avenue where by day the circling gulls remind us of the near sea and shipping; where by night passes "the white procession of the stars." Here lived Percival Lowell who visioned the Martian canals, T. W. Parsons who caught an echo of Dante, MacDowell who heard the music of the spheres, and a constantly varying group of musicians and writers.

I like to remember that once Phillips Brooks rolled hoop here with little Me. Once Dr. Holmes paused to pat my long curls. And Margaret Deland's big dog, when she was living just beyond, used every day to escort me part way to school, my little paw held safely in his big teeth. I remember too how we children used always to run past "Number 13" because it was "unlucky." We knew nothing of its particular

ghost, unless by instinct. A certain lady has often seen the stately blue uniformed figure of Admiral Decatur passing up and down the narrow staircase of this house where he met a sudden end. She speaks of it quite simply. But who indeed would mind any of the pleasant ghosts that haunt our Hill, "beautifully peopled as Jacob's Ladder"?

Every year for a day in spring and fall, my humble back yard offers the hospitality of its oak tree and patient flower boxes to a shy brown minstrel, a hermit thrush. Perhaps his forbears sipped of Blackstone's spring, so he keeps tryst. Let him be the living symbol of our Hill's perennial tradition, even as our Christmas candles mean more than the beauty they reveal. Let our light still shine, while Books and Hospitality prevail.

"Merry Christmas to everybody, from Beacon Hill!"



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